



Kentucky Artisan Center at Berea

Tourism, Arts and Heritage Cabinet

Kentucky Agates: Start to Finish

Jeweler and Lapidary Artist John Leeds Demonstrates at Kentucky Artisan Center

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BEREA, Ky. – On Saturday, Sept. 6, jeweler and lapidary artist John Leeds, of Richmond, will demonstrate how he cuts and polishes Kentucky agates from 10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at the Kentucky Artisan Center at Berea.

Beautiful specimens of banded Kentucky agates have been discovered in Estill, Lee, Powell, Jackson and Rockcastle counties. These agates are called “fortification” agates because of the bands and striations that look like the ground plans of old castles or fort walls. Leeds has been hunting, cutting and selling Kentucky agate for 26 years. He collects them by searching along creek beds.

“After a hard rain the material can get washed out of the ground and into the creeks,” he said. “I also look for them in the rocks that pile up and gather behind a tractor plow or on a freshly cut logging road.”

The colors of Kentucky agate range from gray through yellow, pink, peach, purple, black and red – and all combinations of these. Because the color runs in unpredictable bands, the stones are often cut free-form. Stones with red and black banding are the rarest and most expensive kind.

“The color combination of red and black can command about eight times more than the other agate colors,” Leeds says. “I find only about one or two a year.”

Agate is a microscopic crystalline form of quartz, which is a silicate mineral and has delicate and varying shades of color arranged in layers. Typically, agates have bands of color which are irregular, curved or in concentric patterns. These colors are due to chemical impurities; for example, iron gives a red or orange color and manganese or calcium gives black or blue colors.

Lapidary techniques and skills allow Leeds to slice these multi-colored agates into centerpieces for his one-of-a-kind jewelry, building them into bezels of either sterling silver or 14-karat gold. By combining the stones with designs that emphasize or reiterate the banding patterns within each stone, Leeds has unlimited opportunities to make unique jewelry.

“I enjoy working with rock that has usual markings and color combinations,” he explains. “At the end of the day, I have just one goal in mind – and that is to have created some form of art that makes a person want to stop, look, touch and wear it as a true object of desire.”

Leeds studied the craft of jewelry design in Florence, Italy, and at Eastern Kentucky University where he received a bachelor’s degree in art. He has been creating original works of art for more than 27 years and became interested in Kentucky agates 21 years ago. His jewelry designs are influenced by his studies in Italy and his Irish heritage.

Jewelry by Leeds is regularly found at the Kentucky Artisan Center, located just off Interstate 75 at Berea, Exit 77. The center's exhibits, shopping and travel information areas are open daily, year-round, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with the cafe open from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Admission is free.

The center currently features works by more than 700 artisans from more than 100 counties across the Commonwealth. A gallery exhibit, "Put a Lid on It: Containers by Kentucky Artisans," is on display through Feb. 28, 2015; and in the lobby, "Kentucky Bourbon: Distillation and Inspiration," is on display through Nov. 16. For information about the center's events call 859-985-5448, visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/kentucky.artisan.center, or go to the center's website at www.kentuckyartisancenter.ky.gov.

The Kentucky Artisan Center at Berea is an agency in the Tourism, Arts and Heritage Cabinet of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.



Photos: _A variety of sliced Kentucky agates – photos by Roland McIntosh, Winchester, KY



Photos: _A selection of commissioned Kentucky agate jewelry designed by John Leeds of Richmond